

Better Angels of Our Nature: Freemasonry in the American Civil War

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Review

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Halleran, Michael A. *Better Angels of Our Nature: Freemasonry in the American Civil War*. University of Alabama Press, \$24.95 ISBN 978-0-8173-1695-2

Attempting to Crack the Code

Book-length appreciations of freemasonry during the Civil War period have come at roughly half-century intervals. In 1916, Jacob Jewell's *Heroic Deeds of Noble Master Masons* represented little more than an anecdotal compilation. In 1961, at the time of the Civil War centennial, Allen E. Roberts offered a more thorough attempt to do this with his *House Undivided*. Michael A. Halleran, a freemason and a lawyer by profession, aspired to go beyond antiquarian and anecdotal interests within the order itself, using serious scholarship and critical analysis to reach a broader readership with his *Better Angels of Our Nature*. This he has certainly done.

Halleran sought to achieve "a more evidentiary approach to documenting the intersections—and there are many—of warfare and Masonry during the American Civil War"(6). A prologue debunking the story that Lewis Armistead gave a Masonic signal of distress when wounded at Gettysburg clarifies his approach. The first two chapters define freemasonry and its importance, along with an overview of the diverse responses to the sectional crisis among Masons. Four chapters follow discussing the order's appeal in wartime, its role in saving lives of fellow members, its mediation of capture and imprisonment, and its assurances of proper burial of Masons from among the legions of the dead. A final chapter discusses military lodges and black freemasonry.

In all of this, Halleran strives for the best and most thorough documentation available. In general, he knows the sources thoroughly and exploits them in a masterly fashion. What he produced has certainly exceeded its predecessors and *Better Angels of Our Nature* is surely the best volume available on wartime

freemasonry, and one I would recommend to anyone interested in the subject.

Yet, *Better Angels* will simply not persuade readers uninterested in the subject to acknowledge its importance. In the first line of his preface, Halleran describes the work as “a myopic view of the American Civil War,” which reflects some underlying assumptions about the ultimately marginal nature of freemasonry in our efforts to see the big picture of the Civil War and the society that waged it (ix). In 1989, Mark Carnes’s *Secret Rituals and Manhood in Victorian America* discussed the central role of late-nineteenth-century fraternalism as essential to the construction of respectable white middle class masculinity. Since, a growing number of scholars around the world have underscored the importance of Masonry in the development of such vital historical considerations as national identity, political traditions, social movements, and gender identities. Regrettably, very little of these larger concerns actually inform Halleran’s study, which leaves a work with several glaring blind spots.

Efforts to locate freemasonry within the fraternal culture of the period are formal and largely *pro forma*. Why were these legions of men professing brotherhood not in the same organization or, at least, the same kind of organization? Christianity and the revivals of the Second Great Awakening fostered Antimasonry and remade the world of American fraternalism. The importance of these impulses in fostering abolitionism and social reform were vital and what did this rising tide of popular discontent mean for freemasonry? Southern whites disproportionately contributed their numbers to the roughly 200,000 Masons on the eve of the war, but what did this mean? Or was this merely an apparent sectional dimension?

Raising such questions certainly clarifies the complexities of American freemasonry at the time. Halleran’s *Better Angels* presents an oversimplified and unitary freemasonry that never actually existed. He distinguishes between the York and the Scottish Rites, and very briefly discusses Prince Hall Masonry, but does not explore the complexities of fringe masonry and quasi-Masonic orders. While it is sometimes difficult to draw the line between Masonry and other fraternal organizations, the difficulty itself merits noting.

In recounting the efforts of an Iowa officer to save a Masonic library in Arkansas, Halleran makes the single mention of the books’ owner, Confederate General Albert Pike (p. 64). *Better Angels* calls Pike “the most famous American

Mason" after the war, without explaining why: his reorganization of the Scottish rite, which had earlier been in shambles. In fact, the Scottish Rite provides an example of one of those American institutions that had long been divided into Southern and Northern Jurisdictions. A book on the role of freemasonry in the explosion of the sectional conflict should discuss the antebellum sectional division as a major part of the order.

Freemasonry contributed to the republicanism which became so contested in mid-nineteenth-century America. For a century, there were conflicts within the order—or between different kinds of Masons—over the importance of politics, property, and liberty; the American Civil War became part of that conflict. The oversimplification of freemasonry precludes an appreciation for its multi-faceted role or apparent role in the politics of the period. The sources on “Bleeding Kansas” for the years leading to the war regularly ascribe the activities of the so-called Border Ruffians attempting to impose slavery there to “blue lodges,” apparently associated with the Southern Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite. The charges may have reflected the evangelical distrust of Masonry among the antislavery settlers in the territory, but at least one of John Brown’s men later gained admission to the Virginia jail holding the old warrior by flashing Masonic signs he had picked up from their old proslavery foes in the West.

On the other hand, the few pages on black freemasonry are equally unconcerned with their larger role, and this may be the most glaring problem with *Better Angels*. Many of the most prominent black abolitionists were Prince Hall Masons, which emphasized its Egyptian and African roots. From any of a dozen angles, these bodies became intimately involved in assisting runaway slaves and resisting the Fugitive Slave Act. This look at the *Better Angels* remains far too white to recognize that the quasi-Masonic role in the antislavery tradition was black. Moreover, Prince Hall, with its related local secret societies, bears the closest North American resemblance to the politicalized republican circles in the Old World. The absence of these concerns leaves Halleran’s book more anemic and pale than it should have been.

At points, Halleran seems less concerned that his predecessors had not transcended an anecdotal approach than with the fact that they had not footnoted their anecdotes. He carefully dissects the question of whether Lew Armistead gave a Masonic sign of distress when he was wounded but says nothing as to what importance this would have in our broader understanding. Finally, numerous Masonic scholars, such as Brent Morris regularly educate those

interested in freemasonry about the order and use larger questions to make more interested those who are not primarily concerned about it.

Still, though, it will probably not take another half century before a good scholar of freemasonry attempts another study. While there is no reason they need to be a Mason, there is certainly no reason for them not to be one. In the end, encouraging an interest in such efforts among those already interested in the subject will likely be the best contribution of *Better Angels of Our Nature*. As with the order, the writing of its history is an inherently group process.

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